



# Repairing the Breach: Cultural Organizing and the Politics of Knowledge<sup>1</sup>

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The main obstacle to genuine and productive partnerships between institutions of higher education and the professionals they prepare, on the one side, and communities, on the other, is a “knowledge war,” full of invisible hierarchies and exclusions, producing a hypercompetitive achievement culture. This knowledge war dramatically limits communities’ and citizens’ ability to act on the problems they face today. It also sharply erodes the power of higher education, professionals, and civic leaders to help shape the culture in democratic ways.

In the first instance, partisans of technocratic knowledge champion the singular authority of scientific and academic knowledge. This is the politics of “the best and the brightest” bringing solutions to those seen as ignorant. In 1997, Minnesota legislators sympathetic to the fight of faculty against a proposed draconian revision of the tenure code came to the University of Minnesota to discuss the issue. Senior faculty members lectured them on what they saw as their mistakes, damaging the legislature’s relationship with the university.

On the other side are those who, claiming the experience of community, express an anti-intellectual politics of grievance. Sarah Palin is a case in point. The appeal of her message reflects an overlooked divide in America – in recent elections, differences in education levels are a far more salient factor in how people vote than income levels.<sup>2</sup>

We have to get beyond arrogant experts and aggrieved communities if we want to develop communities’ capacities to solve problems and also to generate a larger vision of a good society. Community is the living context for evaluating expert knowledge. But without

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<sup>i</sup> This is adapted from “Democratizing the Politics of Knowledge,” a research report for the Kettering Foundation, forthcoming 2009 on lessons from the Obama campaign and other recent civic developments. This also draws from my work as co-chair of the civic engagement subcommittee of the Obama campaign.

engagement with other ways of knowing appeal to community knowledge can easily produce a Know-Nothing reaction to the larger world.

The knowledge war has had many corrosive effects. Professionals have narrowed identities from “civic” to “disciplinary” – no longer do most teachers or clergy or businessmen and women think of themselves as building the civic life of a place through their work. Dominant models of knowledge-making undercut the authority of forms of knowledge which are not academic – the wisdom passed down by cultural elders, spiritual insight, local and craft knowledge, the common sense of a community about raising children. As former Occidental College president Ted Mitchell has observed, one percent of Americans or less produce the knowledge that “counts.” Institutions of many kinds – from schools to businesses, congregations to nonprofits, government agencies to colleges and universities – have lost community roots. As a marker, one can chart the disappearance of photos, notices and other signs of neighborhood life from the walls of schools, nonprofits, businesses and public agencies. Such institutions may be “in” community, but they are not “of” community. And electoral politics and civic action have become increasing technocratic, mobilizing constituencies around pre-determined agendas with up to date communications technologies, targeting “enemies,” developing scripts which define issues as good versus bad.

Non-professional citizens, meanwhile, relate to institutions as consumers, not as producers and creators of a democratic way of life. An aggrieved, anti-intellectual, “Know-Nothing” culture spreads, especially dysfunctional for those in poverty or social isolation. Know-Nothing politics disparages academic knowledge, science, and professional practices in the name of community and personal experience. This has been long developing. At the heart of “the Reagan Revolution,” it pervaded the Bush presidency.

If we are to build communities’ civic agency – capacities to work across differences to meet our common challenges – we need to democratize the politics of knowledge and end the knowledge war. This requires learning from effective community organizing the idea of “schools for public life,” where ordinary people develop skills, habits, and confidence of citizenship. It also means creating what might be called middle spaces, not owned by academics or professionals, but open to academic and scientific knowledge, where different ways of knowing and acting intermingle in creative ways. Middle spaces put science and academic knowledge in the mix, “on tap, not on top.” They also recognize the power and the limits of communal knowledge.

As background, it is useful to examine how traditional politics “froze” political identities, to look at the ways in which an alternative has emerged from the world of community organizing over the last generation, and to see how a broader “democratic cultural organizing” is also needed to create spaces for public life and civic learning, crossing the borders of academia and community life.

## Freezing identities -- A brief history of conventional politics

*Would it be dangerous to conclude that the corrupt politician himself, because he is democratic in method, is on a more ethical line of social development than the reformer who believes that the people must be made over by 'good citizens' and governed by 'experts'? The former at least are engaged in that great moral effort of getting the mass to express itself, and of adding this mass energy and wisdom to the community as a whole. Jane Addams, "On Political Reform," 1902 <sup>3</sup>*

Jane Addams, in her essay published in 1902, warned about the emergence of a class of leaders, credentialized "experts" as she described them, who saw themselves outside the life of the people. In her view, detached expertise reinforced existing hierarchies based on wealth and power and created new forms of hierarchical power which were threatening the everyday life of communities. Her warnings anticipated the rise of technocracy in its various forms, from bureaucratic service delivery to mobilizing politics which divides the world into innocents on the one side and evil doers on the other. "We are all involved in this political corruption," she argued. "None of us can stand aside; our feet are mired in the same soil, and our lungs breathe the same air."<sup>4</sup>

Addams' warnings applied to a group of architects of a new way of seeing the world which replaced "politics" with scientific administration of the state. Intellectuals came to write "about" politics far more than they practiced it democratically.

As historian Daniel Rodgers has described in *Atlantic Crossings*, the roots of the academic detachment grew rapidly before the war. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, American graduate students studying in Europe were fired with the same reformist zeal to tame the destructive forces of the market which moved Jane Addams and others of their generation outside of academia. But academics especially adopted a model of "scientific objectivity" and policy making in private consultation with politicians, far removed from public involvement. Young academics had passionate concerns to temper the workings of the marketplace. But more and more, they saw this as an elite activity.<sup>5</sup>

These trends increasingly shaped conventional definitions of democracy and politics. By the period after World War II, Seymour Martin Lipset was able to define democracy as a system of elections with scarcely a murmur of dissent in his 1960 work, *Political Man*. Politics similarly came to be located in the state according to wide intellectual agreement. As I argued in my 2002 and 2007 Dewey lectures at the University of Michigan, this relocation reversed two thousand years of history about the meaning of politics, a history championed by Bernard Crick in his great 1962 dissenting work, *In Defense of Politics*. Crick recalled for modern audiences politics as "a great and civilizing activity." He emphasized politics as negotiation and

engagement of diverse views and interests. Drawing on Aristotle and Hannah Arendt, Crick argued that politics is about plurality, not similarity. Aristotle, and following him Arendt, had proposed that an emphasis on the “unity” of the political community destroyed its defining quality. He contrasted politics with military alliance, based on “similarity” of aim. In this vein, Crick defended politics against a list of forces which he saw as obliterating recognition of plurality. Its “enemies” included nationalism, technology, and mass democracy, as well as partisans of conservative, liberal, and socialist ideologies.<sup>6</sup>

Crick’s view was rare. Lipset and Stein Rokkan’s *Party Systems and Voter Alignments* summed up long developing definitions of politics tied to what they termed the “cleavages” of modern society, based on divisions between classes, church and state, and clashes between the national state and subordinate group identities based on regions, ethnicities, or language. These solidified in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, coming to define the nature of political struggle and even everyday social interaction, “freezing” political identities. I learned about a striking illustration, “the pillarization” of the Netherlands, when I worked with Dutch and other colleagues from around the world on the Civic Driven Change Initiative in 2008.<sup>7</sup>

In the US, state-centered democracy and politics generated the major strand of liberalism in the last century, “mass politics.” Mass politics stresses universal claims, distributive justice, individual rights, and a consumer view of the citizen. The origins of mass politics are in the Progressive movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a movement whose complex and contradictory currents are traced in David Thelen’s *The New Citizenship*. Thelen showed how the consumer culture provided goods and experiences that democratized daily life, as people were able to use new products as objects for discussions and collaboration in communities, and also expanded their identifications with others outside immediate worlds of place or culture or race or partisan identity. But in the last half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a one dimensional view of the person took hold among opinion elites, that ordinary people (if not themselves) are singularly concerned with filling their needs and wants, not with questions of life purpose, creativity, civic contribution, or meaningful work. As the philosopher Michael Sandel has put it, “A [mass] politics based on consumer identities...asks how best – most fully, or fairly, or efficiently to satisfy [needs and wants].”<sup>8</sup> The historian Steve Fraser described how mass politics spread in the 1930s around the concept of “a new man—existentially mobile, more oriented to consumption than production, familiar with the impersonal rights and responsibilities of industrial due process.” Mass politics, Fraser observes, “was inconceivable apart from a political elite in command of the state, committed to a program of enlarged government spending, financial reform, and redistributive taxation, presiding over a reconstituted coalition in the realm of mass politics”.<sup>9</sup>

Mass politics crystallized in the mobilizing approaches to citizen action and elections that emerged in the 1970s and have continued in groups like the PIRGS on campuses and environmental, consumer, public health and other civic groups ever since. Mobilizing techniques include the door to door canvass, robo-calls, direct mail fundraising, internet

mobilizations and other mass communications methods. They build on ancient human tendencies to demonize those outside one's life worlds, as well as modern tendencies, fed by inventions like the printing press, to see those outside "imagined communities" of nationhood, ethnicity, religion, partisan politics and other differences in antagonistic ways. But mobilization has taken "us versus them" to new levels of psychological sophistication, using communications techniques based on a formula: find a target or enemy to demonize, stir up emotion with inflammatory language using a script that defines the issue in good versus evil terms and shuts down critical thought, and convey the idea that those who champion the victims will come to the rescue.

Mobilizing techniques can be highly effective in activating people across large areas using a Manichean message, and they have spread across the world in the era of global telecommunications. In the US, they have come to dominate across the political spectrum. They are, in fact, a kind of signature of a mass society which conceives of people in "frozen" categories and market niches rather than in narrative ways. And the pattern of one way, expert interventions and mobilizing inattentive to the cultures and individual stories of communities is pervasive, across the whole sweep of our civic life. YMCAs have traded community problem solving for racquetball courts; K-12 schools have reconceived their students and families as customers.

Mobilizing has succeeded in winning victories for disadvantaged groups and achieved other successes on environmental, consumer, and other regulatory issues in a difficult political culture – it is easy to understand the rationale. But it is a "slash and burn" approach which ravages the larger civic culture and dumbs-down public discussion.

## **Unfreezing identities: the politics of broad-based community organizing**

Over the last generation, close to two hundred groups called "broad-based" community organizations involving several million people have begun to "unfreeze politics." They have re-introduced civic agency into a society where people's capacities for self-directed collective action had sharply eroded. This is the environment which shaped Barack Obama as a young community organizer for the Gamaliel Foundation.

This community organizing approach is also limited by the failure of such organizing to take into account "the power of ideas," knowledge making and cultural production as a form of power itself. This has meant that organizers have not addressed technocracy and its effects. It has also limited organizers' capacities to impact the larger society, beyond their organizations, through cultural organizing.

Broad-based community organizing networks include the Gamaliel Foundation, as well as the Industrial Areas Foundation, PICO, DART, and many independent groups. In all, Republicans

and well as Democrats are involved. Some organizations have a wide range of religious views - Catholics, Protestants, Jews, Muslims, Unitarians and some nonbelievers. They bring together African Americans, Spanish-speaking Americans, Asian Americans, European Americans, sometimes Native Americans. Though their primary base is working families, they include very poor and a few in the upper class.

On local and state levels, broad-based community organizing groups have accumulated remarkable successes. For instance, the BUILD group in Baltimore pioneered living wage legislation for city workers, an initiative that has since spread across the country. The COPS group in San Antonio, pioneering many of the approaches of broad based organizing, has won more than a billion dollars in infrastructure improvement in the once extremely impoverished barrios of the West and South Side of the city. It has shifted development patterns, changed the make-up of the city government, and led in the creation of a state-wide network of the Industrial Areas Foundation (IAF). State affiliates of IAF, Gamaliel Foundation, and PICO have undertaken successful state wide campaigns on issues such as school funding, immigrant rights, and health care.

Community organizing, at the deepest level, is best understood not as a method of civic action but as a philosophy based on a narrative view that recognizes each person to be unique, dynamic, and immensely complex. And it involves developing public skills to engage the story of the other in work across differences on common challenges. Members of broad-based community organizations learn to understand the stories and motivations of others of different income, religious, cultural or partisan backgrounds through what are called "one on ones," the foundational method of civic politics, for the sake of effective public action. They learn to think in long term and strategic ways. They pay close attention to local cultures and networks. All this is not to do away with conflict – civic politics in such groups, as elsewhere, often *surfaces* previously buried forms of conflict. But it is to use conflict for productive ends and public purposes.

Though broad-based community organizing groups work through the medium of issues, their deeper focus is cultural, especially emphasizing religious, democratic, community, and family values understood in inclusive and open-ended fashion. Such community organizations define their overall work as building thriving communities. As Andres Sarabia told me some years ago, "We learned after the first year that the issues are the dessert, not the main meal," Sarabia was the first president of the Communities Organized for Public Service group founded in San Antonio in 1973, a model for broad based organizing. "The main meal is the renewal of our communities."

Organizers sometimes also describe their work as creating "universities of public life." Phrased in the language of complex adaptive systems, their successes in discovering and developing public talent provide examples of the "multiplier effects" when self-directing and interacting agents adapt to and learn from engagement with their environments and each other. Broad-based community organizations also contrast such *organizing* with *mobilizing*, using a

distinction from the sixties freedom movement described in Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom*. Mobilizing efforts were the marches and sit-ins and other protests. While mobilizing is best known, community level organizing was the movement's foundation. It developed a profound sense of civic agency, "we are the ones we've been waiting for," in the words of the freedom song.

These groups stress moving from "protest to governance," as described by Gerald Taylor, a key architect of organizing. "Moving into power means learning how to be accountable," said Taylor. "It means being able to negotiate and compromise. It means understanding that people are not necessarily evil because they have different interests or ways of looking at the world."<sup>10</sup> Such groups do not shy away from conflict. They recognize its uses, both in dealing with others outside their ranks and in fostering public growth through agitation within. But they have become sophisticated in forming what they call public relationships with establishment leaders whom many once saw simply as the enemy. A story from the BUILD group in Baltimore, an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation, illustrates the "unfreezing" of politics and adaptive learning that constantly take place. When BUILD leaders met for the first time with Paul Sarbanes, senior senator from Maryland, he welcomed them, took out his notepad, and asked, "what can I do for you?" "Nothing," was the answer. "We will be around for a long time, and you are likely to be as well. We want to develop a relationship. We need to understand your interests, why you went into politics, and what you are trying to achieve."<sup>11</sup>

The dynamic qualities of such civic politics form a contrast with mass mobilizing politics and other forms of technocratic action both in method and in philosophy. Mass mobilizing politics generates habits of thinking in terms of narrow and static categories -- "liberal," "conservative," "Evangelical," "Muslim," "rich," "homeless" and the like. Civic politics cultivates the habits of using categories and pattern making -- essential to any action -- in fluid, open, and provisional ways. Rom Coles, a political theorist and organizer now at Northern Arizona University, recounted the immensely dynamic qualities of such politics that he saw when he became active in CAN, a community organizing effort in Durham, while he was at Duke University. "Through hundreds of dialogues in pairs, stories circulate which would be difficult or impossible to surface in larger settings, and they begin to weave together a complex variegated fabric of democratic knowledges about an urban area and its people. In this more responsive and receptive context, relationships are formed and deepened in which a rich complex critical vision of a community develops along with the gradual articulation of alternative possibilities." The process develops skills of public interaction and public view. "As different positions, problems, passions, interests, traditions, and yearnings are shared through careful practices of listening, participants begin to develop an increasingly relational sense of their interests and orientations in ways that often transfigure the senses with which they began."<sup>12</sup>

Organizing holds a generative and dynamic concept of the citizen as problem solver, co-creator of public goods, and co-producer of a democratic society, someone whose talents and



identity are expanded by the practice of civic politics. It fosters what Doran Schrantz, a Gamaliel organizer, calls people's "public growth." Ernesto Cortes uses the theological concept of *metanoia*, or transformation of being, to describe this process. Barack Obama's autobiography, *Dreams from my Father*, includes powerful descriptions of such transformation, most significantly of himself as a young man confused about his mixed cultural identity, finding himself as he worked with poor people in Chicago.

## Breaking a bond: A short history of cultural and community organizing

*The world is deluged with panaceas, formulas, proposed laws, machineries, ways out, and myriads of solutions. It is significant and tragic that almost every one of these proposed plans and alleged solutions deals with the structure of society, but none concerns the substance—the people. This, despite the eternal truth of the democratic faith that the solution always lies with the people.* Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* <sup>13</sup>

The modern roots of community and cultural organizing alike are found especially in the 1930s, though there are also earlier wellsprings like the settlement house model of Jane Addams, and popular education traditions from Scandinavian countries. The spirit of civic, populist politics from 1930s' organizing was vividly captured in the quote above by Saul Alinsky, an iconoclastic activist and philosopher of organizing.

Alinsky made major contributions to the field. But by the end of his life he had also lost the richness and dynamism of civic politics and the way it expresses cultural values. His wry and cynical focus on "the world as it is" took mass society as a given that could not be changed. The commonplace crediting of Alinsky as the dean of modern community organizing has had the effect of obscuring the sharp differences between mobilizing and organizing philosophies. His authority, as iconic figure in organizing, has also contributed to breaking the bond between community and cultural organizing in recent decades. Clarifying Alinsky's history and role is critical for moving forward.

Alinsky's ideas were shaped in the organizing efforts of the Great Depression, particularly the experiences of anti-Stalinist public intellectuals and activists who were associated with the "Popular Front." The phrase itself conveyed a strategic framework developed by the Communist International in 1935, which had come to view its strategy of attacking moderates and even socialists as a disastrous mistake after the triumph of fascists in Germany and elsewhere. Communists began to make broad, if cynical alliances across party lines. Alinsky and others anti-Stalinist progressives, including later key civil rights activists like Ella Baker, Myles Horton, Bayard Rustin; labor leaders like Sidney Hillman, A. Philip Randolph, and John Lewis; political leaders such as Hubert Humphrey and Eleanor Roosevelt; and religious leaders



like Reinhold Niebuhr, liked broad alliances that confounded “frozen” political identities but hated the division between “mass” and scientific “vanguard” central to Marxist-Leninist politics.

Civic politics had roots in living local cultures which created multiple free spaces, public spaces in the life of communities that interacted in fluid ways, sustaining relational and democratic cultures and experiences. For instance, in Minneapolis and St. Paul eleven settlement houses existed in the 1930s and 1940s whose mission was “to develop neighborhood forces, arouse neighborhood consciousness, to improve standards of living, incubate principles of sound morality, promote a spirit of civic righteousness, and to cooperate with other agencies in bettering living, working, and leisure-time conditions.” Settlement houses typically had staff living on site or nearby “in order to ensure that those employed understood the local community dynamics and undertook all their work from that vantage.” They stressed working *with* neighborhood residents and new immigrants, rather than “ministering unto” them. This meant that settlements did most of their work through “the influence and power of example.” Their extensive “club system” included sports, debate, literature and other activities, that were all seen in ways that had kinship with the folk school and popular education movements in Europe, as methods for civic education and development. Settlements also aimed at educating college students to think of themselves as citizens, working with residents and immigrants who were fellow citizens of the neighborhood.”<sup>14</sup>

These cultural spaces, common across the country, were nourished by civic professionals who saw their work as sustaining the civic life of places and also building larger movements for change – what can be described as cultural organizing. In the 1930s, the idea that professionals’ work should develop the productive civic capacities of people and communities and contribute to enrichment of democratic culture, not simply provide services, was widespread. In Harlem, for instance, in the 1920s and 1930s, a range of professionals -- artists and poets, labor organizers, teachers, ministers and musicians, to list a few -- saw themselves as having a civic obligation to develop the capacities of ordinary people, invisible in the larger society. James Weldon Johnson, an architect of the Harlem Renaissance, put it this way, “Harlem is more than a community; it is a large-scale laboratory experiment. Through his artistic efforts the Negro is smashing immemorial stereotypes.” He saw blacks “impressing upon the national mind the conviction that he is an active and important force in American life; that he is a creator as well as a creature.” The Harlem Renaissance meant that the black American was to be seen as “a contributor to the nation’s common cultural store; in fine, he is helping to form American civilization.”<sup>15</sup>

In *The Big Tomorrow*, Lary May has described the ways in which a group of cultural workers in the film industry interacting with local community organizing and cultural settings, led by Will Rogers, generated a sustained movement to change the values and images of “The American Dream.” Many other forms of cultural organizing also grew from such foundations. In *Cultural Front*, Michael Denning traces progressive political organizing among “cultural workers” of many kinds during the New Deal, including journalists, screenwriters and artists, scholars and educators and union organizers. Using the idea of an “historic bloc” of variegated forces of

diverse interests and motivations united around certain overarching goals (these included defeat of fascism, defense of democracy, and pursuit of economic and racial justice), Denning shows how the cultural front played a central role in re-shaping American culture. The content of the American dream shifted from the individualist, WASP-oriented, consumerist ideal of the 1920s to a far more cooperative, racially pluralist and egalitarian vision of democracy. In the process, cultural workers developed a strategic consciousness of their own potential role in the battle of ideas and conceptions of the good society, as potential allies of industrial workers, blacks, farmers, small businesses and other groups, fighting for themselves as well as others. Overall, the cultural front and its strands of organizing created a medium and mirror in which people saw themselves acting in more cooperative, assertive and public ways. They asserted, instead, democratic values of diversity, equality, cooperation, justice, and the commonwealth. The "people," seen by intellectuals in the 1920s as the repository of crass materialism and parochialism, was rediscovered as the source of civic creativity.

Saul Alinsky was closely associated with the progressive civic, populist movement on both the community level and also in its cultural organizing expressions. After graduating from the University of Chicago, he worked with the Chicago Area Project, an effort addressing juvenile delinquency begun by Clifford Shaw. Shaw's model of social action differed sharply from conventional social work, which defined professionals as the most important actors and their knowledge as derived from a scientific methodology detached from communal experience. In contrast, Shaw believed that communities held within themselves the main resources and capacities to solve juvenile delinquency. The professional's best role was catalyst and facilitator, not problem solver. In 1938, Clifford Shaw assigned Alinsky to Chicago's "Back of the Yards" community, an area of 90,000 impoverished, mostly Eastern European, Catholic immigrants in the shadow of the meat packing companies that Upton Sinclair had made legendary in his book, *The Jungle*. Working closely with Joe Meegan, a young Irish resident who had already sought to build an area-wide community group, Alinsky helped organize a wide array of groups into the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council (BYNC) around a campaign to support the union organizing drive. BYNC brought together priests, small business owners, housewives, youth, communist organizers, the American Legion and labor rank and file in an unlikely, freewheeling mix. The organization undertook a range of community initiatives throughout the 1940s, from hot lunch programs to recreation projects that involved teenagers directly in their planning and implementation. A byproduct was sharp decline in juvenile delinquency.<sup>16</sup>

Alinsky's first book, *Reveille for Radicals*, published in 1946, codified principles of Back of the Yards and other organizing. Perhaps its most important dimension is the politics of knowledge-making it conveys, which communicates the interplay between community and cultural organizing. Alinsky emphasized the need for popular organizations to be rooted in and work through local community life. "The foundation of a People's Organization is in the communal life of the local people," argued Alinsky. "Therefore the first stage in the building of a People's Organization is the understanding of the life of a community, not only in terms of

the individual's experiences, habits, values and objectives but also from the point of view of the collective habits, experiences, customs, controls and values of the whole group, the community traditions." The organizer "should have a familiarity with the most obvious parts of a people's traditions." Organizers would often disagree with local traditions or groups. But efforts at democratic transformation and change must always be undertaken in the terms and histories given. "The starting of a People's Organization is not a matter of personal choice. You start with the people, their traditions, their prejudices, their habits, their attitudes, and all of those other circumstances that make up their lives." To know a community "is to know the values, objectives, customs, sanctions, and the taboos of these groups. It is to know them not only in terms of their relationships and attitudes toward one another but also in terms of what relationship all of them have toward the outside....To understand the traditions of a people is . . . to ascertain those social forces which argue for constructive democratic action as well as those which obstruct democratic action."<sup>17</sup>

Many activists and public intellectuals in the thirties shared Alinsky's view, coming to appreciate both community-level organizing and also its connections to and enrichment by cultural organizing. Leaders in the freedom movement such as Ella Baker, Myles Horton, and Bayard Rustin all had roots in the anti-communist popular organizing of the 1930s. There are parallel strands of organizing and politics around the world, such as the folk school and popular education traditions of Scandinavia, the popular education and liberation theology traditions that came alive in Latin America, and the Freedom Charter and later Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa. Thus, Nelson Mandela, Steve Biko and others in South Africa all learned and practiced a politics that included diverse perspectives and interests and that stressed confidence-building work and education. All these popular organizing traditions had what Charles Payne called an "expansive concept of democracy" and a "developmental understanding of politics." As Payne put it, "Above all else...they stressed a developmental style of politics, one in which the important thing was the development of efficacy of those most affected by a problem." This meant that "whether a community achieved this or that tactical objective was likely to matter less than whether the people in it came to see themselves as having the right and the capacity to have some say-so in their own lives."<sup>18</sup> They also appreciated the role of cultural and educational workers in creating larger patterns of democratic meaning and possibility, beyond local communities.

These themes came alive in the Citizenship Schools of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference which shaped me as a young man. SCLC included grassroots organizing elements in its Citizenship Education Program. But community organizing was not SCLC's strong suit, not nearly as extensive as in the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, SNCC. The brilliance of figures like Martin Luther King and his colleagues was cultural organizing. They developed and articulated democratic currents and themes in American culture that expanded the imaginative space of democracy. They also were skilled at working with journalists and other cultural workers, as well as leaders in politics and professional and intellectual life, to disseminate such themes. Barack Obama, schooled by community organizing and also sensing

its limits, was inspired and shaped by the cultural organizing tradition of the black church and SCLC in particular as much as by community organizing.

By the 1960s, Alinsky had shifted his emphasis in ways that contributed to a severance of the connection between community organizing and cultural organizing. He spent much of his time speaking to young radicals on campuses, whom he saw as having “no illusions about the system, but plenty of illusions about the way to change our world.” His second book, *Rules for Radicals*, was “written in desperation” as an attempt to create a “realistic” primer for radicals.<sup>19</sup> The irony was that his “realism,” what he called “the world as it is,” embodied the cultural estrangement of mass society, modern consumer society, mass politics, and the existentially uprooted person as givens. As his biographer Sandy Horwitt has described, Alinsky rejected place as an organizing site. “For more than a decade, as people scattered to the suburbs, he had talked about the declining importance of the old geographical neighborhood where people had lived, worked, and played.”<sup>20</sup>

His approach, drawing on the practicality, power, and realism of thirties’ organizing, had always stressed beginning with “the world as it is.” But by the 1960s, in reaction against what he saw as the hyperbolic rhetoric and posturing of the New Left – but also accepting its cultural estrangement -- Alinsky’s depiction of the world-as-it-is denuded political life of its cultural and normative dimensions: “Once we have moved into the world as it is then we begin to shed fallacy after fallacy.” In the world-as-it-is, as he saw it, “the right things are done only for the wrong reasons,” “constructive actions have usually been in reaction to a threat,” and “morality is to a significant degree a rationalization of the position which you are occupying in the power pattern at a particular time.”<sup>21</sup> In *Rules*, Alinsky proposed a strategy to unite the “have nots” and the “have some want mores” in an alliance against the “haves.” This was a thin and reductive equation of politics that made his book a bible for mobilizing politics for a new generation of activists, growing from the sixties and wanting to become pragmatic.

In the late 1960s and early seventies, other figures were crucial as community organizing began to emerge as a conscious alternative to mobilizing forms of citizen action. Organizing refused the simplicities of “us versus them,” the mobilizing formula embodied in Alinsky’s strategy. It recognized the inevitability of tension and conflict but also the need constantly to complicate conflict. As Ernesto Cortes has put it, organizing depends on its own distinctive habit in public life, the ability to “polarize” and then “depolarize,” keeping in mind the long term public relationship.

Several in the IAF -- Cortes, Ed Chambers, director after Alinsky’s death, Arnie Graff, Sister Christine Stephens, Gerald Taylor, Johnny Ray Youngblood and the Black Caucus, among others-- were far more important than Alinsky in translating deeper organizing themes and philosophy into the new period. Key figures also included Bayard Rustin, a leader in the freedom movement whose 1965 essay “From Protest to Politics” sharply challenged the alienated mass politics he saw developing in the white New Left and among young African

American Black Power advocates alike. Rustin called for an alliance between blacks and white ethnics for progressive change.

Monsignor Geno Baroni, a Catholic priest who had been Catholic coordinator for the March on Washington, and Monsignor John Egan, a priest who had worked with Alinsky for years, were key figures in seeking to articulate a broader philosophy of organizing. Baroni and Egan called for a new populism to bring together blacks and white ethnics through community organizing, which they saw as an alternative to both "universalist liberalism" and neo-conservatism. Baroni described his philosophy more than thirty years ago in language with striking parallels to Barack Obama's Philadelphia speech on race. "The organizer has to believe that ordinary people can build bridges across racial and ethnic lines," he said. "The organizer has to get ordinary people in touch with their roots, their heritage, their best. The organizer has to give ordinary people hope."

Baroni convened the Catholic Committee on Urban Ministry, a nation-wide group that moved Catholic bishops to establish an annual social justice contribution, the Campaign for Human Development, that continues to be the most important single funder of broad based organizing. He founded the National Center of Urban Ethnic Affairs, worked with hundreds of ethnic groups and community organizations through the 1970s, was the driving force behind the National Commission on Neighborhoods, and supported new groups like the National Congress of Neighborhood Women. He also developed policy innovations as assistant secretary of HUD during the Carter administration that point in the direction of "catalytic governance," later described. New populism inspired politicians like Barbara Mikulski, a community organizer who became senator from Maryland, and Marcy Kaptur, a community activist who became a congresswoman from Ohio.

They drew on strands of conservative thought as well as the freedom movement and organizing traditions from the thirties. Especially they were influenced by the mediating structure theory of Peter Berger and others (Egan was chair of the neighborhood project for Berger's Mediating Structure Project at the American Enterprise Institute, at the same time he served on the IAF board). Berger argued that liberalism tends to be blind to the political as distinct from private functions of mediating structures like neighborhood group, congregation, family, and voluntary association. "The main feature of liberalism, as we intend the term, is a commitment to government action toward greater social justice. Liberalism's blindness to mediating structures can be traced to its Enlightenment roots. Enlightenment thought is abstract, universalistic, addicted to what Burke called "geometry in social policy. The concrete particularities of mediating structures find an inhospitable soil in the liberal garden. There the great concern is for the individual and for a just public order, but anything in between is viewed as irrelevant or even an obstacle to the rational ordering of society. What lies in between is dismissed, to the extent it can be, as superstition, bigotry, or more recently cultural lag." 22

Despite the broader aspirations and cultural insights of architects of community organizing like Baker, Rustin, Egan and Baroni, community organizing lost its ties to cultural organizing. In subsequent years, community organizing has created oases of democratic and relational culture in a civically desiccated environment. But such organizing has been limited by a power theory which neglects "knowledge power," including the production of cultural meanings and values. In broad-based community organizing, power assumes two main forms – organized people and organized money. The work of community organizing has been to put "organized people," especially poor and working people, in relationship to "organized money." The neglect of knowledge power makes the theory of power in most community organizing two dimensional, greatly limiting organizers' capacity to challenge the civic erosion caused by technocracy and to generate cultural change beyond its organizations.

The limits of community organizing are reflected in the form of the organization itself. This form is reified in the distinction that every major organizing network makes between "building broad-based organizations," which they define as their aim, and "movements," which they equate with the late Sixties' protests, ephemeral, thin, and transient. The contrast has had the effect of creating a sharp division between internal and external cultures that I have long observed, a sort of civic schizophrenia. Internally, leaders and organizers use a rich relational and value language full of democratic, communal, and religious allusions and references. When they speak to larger audiences outside their ranks, they sound wary and instrumental (though there are important counter trends and exceptions, like the ISAIAH group in Minnesota, which has begun to frame all its work in terms of values of community, hope, justice, and abundance). This limits their larger cultural impact significantly. Even in communities with long standing citizen groups like San Antonio, there has been strikingly little translation of civic politics into the institutional cultures and work of professions or the larger civic discourse.

The time is ripe for interactions between community organizing and the civic movement in higher education and the professions, which hold potential to be a crucial seedbed for a revived democratic cultural organizing. This is dramatized by the success of Obama as a cultural organizer who has helped to revive the great traditions of democratic cultural work from the 1930s and the civil rights movement. In the Obama campaign, cultural organizing was powerfully wedded to grassroots organizing, a process led by Marshall Ganz, who crystallized the organizing philosophy in his concept of "public narrative," which translated philosophy and methods from community organizing into the field operation and wedded it to strong cultural themes of value and story.



## Repairing the breach

*Most people live, whether physically, intellectually, or morally, in a very restricted circle of their potential being...Great emergencies and crises show us how much greater our vital resources are than we had supposed.* William James 1906

Many institutional roots have begun to grow over the last decade for building our institutions as “agents and architects of democracy,” settings in and around which creative cultural organizing can flourish. But for civic engagement to take deep roots in higher education will require a certain de-centering of public work, recognizing that spaces “owned” by higher education are not the best environments for genuinely democratic interaction.

Our civic engagement work with partners through the Center for Democracy and Citizenship has provided us with rich local illustrations of how cultural organizing and community organizing can be joined in community-grounded environments. The work began with my observation that community organizing success depends not only on development of individuals’ public skills and powerful community organizations but also on a change in the cultures of the religious congregations which are their main base. Such change in turn required a significant democratization of the “politics of knowledge” embedded in professional practices of the clergy. Broad based organizing made the work of the clergy more “public,” a process called for in an important IAF document by the Black Caucus in 1981, *Tent of the Presence*, which envisioned a shift from “Moses” leaders to relational, interactive leaders. In such groups, clergy work with their congregations in ways that are far more catalytic, politically educating and empowering than they were trained to do in seminary or divinity schools.

The work of the CDC has been focused on democratizing the politics of knowledge-based institutions where formally credentialed leadership, socialized in academia and shaped by disciplinary identities, have taken over and eviscerated the civic culture. We developed the concept of public work and related practices as a way to translate community organizing themes and philosophy into such settings in ways that would also democratize the politics of knowledge.

Public work is different than service. The service movement, while embodying important ideas of relationship, care, and concern, also all too easily can create “two classes,” givers and receivers. “If I serve, I act, but the other -- the beneficiary -- does not,” as Frances Lappé has observed. “Making ourselves servants, we might also ignore our own legitimate needs as well as be tempted to imagine we already know what others’ needs are.”<sup>23</sup> Public work emphasizes the capacities, talents, and energies of all involved in addressing public challenges and creating public things. Public work also generates a more relational, catalytic professionalism in which professionals learn to put themselves back into the mix of humanity, with transparency about their own interests and stories, working “with” people rather than “on” them.



With partners we adapted community organizing principles and the concept of public work to schools, nonprofits, colleges and universities, government agencies, a nursing home, and a community wide coalition on the West Side of St. Paul.

The potentials of public work will be greatly enriched by partnerships with particular fields and disciplines. But our collaborator William (Bill) Doherty and his students and colleagues have helped to lead the way by showing how public work can be translated into a powerful wellspring of democratic change in family professions. Doherty, who has skillfully cultivated relationships with a variety of journalists, claims his knowledge and skills, but sees himself part of the mix, not the center of the civic universe. In the Families and Democracy initiatives associated with his Center for Citizen Professionalism, professionals work with families on a host of issues to tame the forces of a degraded, hypercompetitive, hyper-individualistic culture that overwhelm families. And families and communities are the main source of energy and action. This transformation in the professionals role, in one sense "giving away" power," has also shown how civic professionals can immensely strengthen their role as democratic culture shapers.

We have seen parallel potential for cultural organizing and culture shaping work tied to community organizing in other contexts. In hundreds of schools and communities in the US and more than a dozen other nations, we have seen how powerfully young people take to the concept and practices of organizing, civic politics, and public work taught and practiced through the youth civic and political education initiative called Public Achievement. We have also learned that it takes sustained organizing to integrate Public Achievement into institutional life in any substantial way. It is not enough to simply celebrate young people's public potentials and capacities. Incorporation depends on changes in the identities of teachers – renewal of the "citizen teacher" as a vital calling. On the West Side of St. Paul, building on the Jane Addams School, which adapts the old Hull House tradition and with parallel to Clifford Shaw's practice in Chicago, we have seen how an organizing approach can begin to transform a neighborhood and its institutions as people reclaim the work of educating children as everyone's responsibility. This work, embodied in the Neighborhood Learning Community, begins to reconnect nonprofits, schools, and businesses with the life of the neighborhood in what Nick Long calls "an ecology of learning." Finally, our efforts to think about large scale cultural organizing – how to build a movement that shifts the culture from "Me toward We" – has birthed a statewide campaign in Minnesota called "Warrior to Citizen." Warrior to Citizen is a broad coalition with the National Guard, state legislators, business groups, the Archdiocese of the Twin Cities and many others, aiming to reintegrate war veterans into the life of communities *as citizens*, recognizing veterans' new skills, insights, and sense of civic consequentiality.<sup>24</sup>

The skills and habits of civic politics in both community and cultural organizing such as relationship-building, tolerance for ambiguity, and ability to deal with conflict constructively are not part of higher education curriculum in normal academic or professional disciplines.

The capacities for civic politics and civic professionalism have to be *learned* in practice. The process entails, as well, *unlearning* tendencies acquired in formal education, such as a hypercompetitive, individualist bent and a posture of intellectual certitude. Bill Doherty estimates that it usually takes two years of the combination of learning and unlearning for most professionals to do real public work.

It may take years to fully learn the habits of public work, citizen professionalism, and unlearn bad habits in the process. But the Obama campaign also dramatized how combining cultural and community organizing can reconstruct the public narratives that frame people's lives far more rapidly. There are foundations developing for civic reframing of our society's public narrative in other settings.

### **Foundations for a wider movement**

In recent years, formal education, like many other institutions, has increasingly pushed parents and residents of local communities to the sidelines.<sup>25</sup> But some trends have also gone against the current, like the community-based schools movement initiated by Ira Harkavy and the Center for Community Partnerships at the University of Pennsylvania. The coalition includes a broad array of groups, unions, and education leaders dedicated to making community-based learning central to education.<sup>26</sup>

In a parallel movement, Deborah Meier, founder of Central Park East schools in East Harlem and Mission Hill School in Boston, has pioneered a movement of schools with a democracy mission. Her schools have been highly acclaimed for their success in educating low income and minority children. Meier retrieves a focus on developing students' democratic habits as the basic strategy. "The real crisis we face is not a threat to America's economic or military dominance but the ebbing strength of our democratic and egalitarian culture." Meier recalls the "traditional public function of schools: to pass on the skills, aptitudes, and habits needed for a democratic way of life," observing that these "are hard to come by; they are not natural to the species. They are as hard to teach as relativity. Democratic culture needs citizens with very strong habits."<sup>27</sup> In Meier's view education today is defined by a false choice between "reformers" advocating a market approach and defenders of the status quo who support school bureaucracies. Both neglect the older aim of education. "

In higher education, several schools have developed a strong and pervasive emphasis on place, civic education, and vocation with public meanings. For instance, Augsburg College in Minneapolis is grounded in a strong sense of its Lutheran theological tradition of educating its students for "vocation in the world." The school combines a commitment to being an engaged college in an inner city neighborhood with a focus on civic education and learning that respects the talents and uniqueness of each student. Two striking and foundational statements of the college, *Extending the Vision* and *Augsburg Vocation* describe the aim of Augsburg education to "provide navigational skills...[developing] graduates who will be prepared for life

and work in a complex and increasingly globalized world; equipped to deal with its diversity of peoples' movements; and opinions; experienced in the uses and limitations of technology; and possessed with a character and outlook influenced by a rich understanding of the Christian faith." Paul Pribbenow, the college president, calls this education of students who learn to develop "a narrative framework in which...tensions are lived, not just debated [and] able to live through the messiness of common work."<sup>28</sup>

In our partnerships in the Center for Democracy and Citizenship on institutional change and education, as we have thought about how to transform sources of civic dysfunction into wellsprings of civic renewal, we have connected with settings "upstream" with interest in developing cultures which prepare young people for public work and citizen professionalism. This has led to an initiative with the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) to incorporate civic agency and public work into regional colleges and universities and minority-serving institutions such as historically black colleges and universities. A key characteristic of AASCU institutions is that they aspire to become "stewards of place," focused on local and regional life. As such, argues George Mehaffy, AASCU vice president, they "are ideal places to focus on building the capacity for civic agency among students, faculty, and staff." The AASCU task force on place called on these institutions to serve as "learners as well as teachers in tackling the myriad of opportunities and issues facing our communities and regions."<sup>29</sup>

A fledgling movement, Imagining America, based on themes of public work and public scholarship, civic agency, and cultural organizing in the arts, humanities and design fields has also developed in recent years, recalling something of the spirit of older cultural organizing in the 1930s. With leadership from Julie Ellison, David Scobey, Timothy Eatman, Jan Cohen-Cruz, Nancy Cantor and many others, it has formed a consortium of institutions dedicated to bringing cultural organizing approaches into higher education and to creating more fluid, reciprocal, interactive partnerships across now often rigid borders and boundaries. Its mission is "To strengthen the public role and democratic purposes of the humanities, arts, and design <http://www.imaginingamerica.org/>)." <sup>30</sup>

All these examples furnish building blocks for interactions among community and cultural organizing that democratize the politics of knowledge. As educational and other institutions regain community roots, they will also help create to fluid, interactive middle spaces, beyond higher education, essential in vital civic learning and knowledge production in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For all the challenges we face – perhaps, as William James suggested a hundred years ago, in part because of them -- we could be at the threshold of a new Civic Renaissance. Such a civic movement will also open new possibilities for building a vibrant, living democracy. <sup>30</sup>

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Coles for feedback on the longer Kettering study. The Kettering study treats David Mathews' useful concept of "organic politics," the distinctive signature of communities, and its sharp differences as a knowledge paradigm to reductive scientific models of knowledge making.

<sup>2</sup> See Michael Tomasky, "How Historic a Victory?", *New York Review of Books*, December 18, 2008 (Vol. LV: 20), pp. 44-47.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Addams, *Democracy and Social Ethics* (New York: Macmillan, 1902), p. 270.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. , p. 256

<sup>5</sup> Daniel Rodgers, *Atlantic Crossings: The Rise of Social Politics, 1900 – 1945* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), p. 108

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Crick, *In Defense of Politics* (London and New York: Continuum, 1962), p. 15. Crick, drawing on Aristotle, stresses the irreducible *plurality* of politics as negotiation of diverse and particular interests. As Aristotle had put it in his second book of *The Politics*: "The nature of the *polis* is to be a plurality. A *polis* is not made up only of so many men but of different kinds of men; for similars do not constitute a *polis*. It is not like a military alliance." From Stephen Everson, Editor, *Aristotle: The Politics and the Constitution of Athens* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 31.

Giovanni Sartori, in his history of the word, "What is Politics," *Political Theory* , Vol. 1, No. 1 (1973), pp. 1-36, details the horizontal relationships of equal citizens at the heart of the language of politics and associated ideas. Not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century did "politics" acquire its associations of "verticality," or relations to the state.

<sup>7</sup> I was struck by how this "freezing" shaped modern societies in Europe as well as—perhaps more sharply than – the US in 2008. J.C.H. Blom *History of the Low Countries*.

<sup>8</sup> Michael J. Sandel, *Democracy's Discontent: America in Search of a Public Philosophy*. (Harvard, 1996), 225.

<sup>9</sup> Steven Fraser, "The Labor Question." in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order: 1930-1980* edited by Stephen Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton University Press, 1989), p. 70.

<sup>10</sup> *The Backyard Revolution: Understanding the New Citizen Movement* (Temple, 1980); *Community Is Possible: Repairing America's Roots* (Harper & Row, 1984); *Free Spaces: The Sources of Democratic Change in America* (Harper & Row, 1986), co-authored with Sara Evans; and *CommonWealth: A Return to Citizen Politics* (Free Press, 1989). Interview with Taylor, April 26, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> This incident was described to me by Doug Miles and several others in BUILD in 1988, as a way to describe their philosophy of public relationship-building.

<sup>12</sup> Rom Coles, "Moving Democracy: IAF Social Movements and the Political Arts of Listening, Traveling, and Tabling in a Heterogeneous World," paper for APSA, August 19-September 2, 2002, Boston, 5

<sup>13</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Reveille for Radicals* p. 40

<sup>14</sup> Stephanie Devitt, "Northeast Neighborhood House: Research report for the Center for Democracy and Citizenship," December 10, 2006, in author's possession, p. 4.

<sup>15</sup> Johnson quoted in Harold Cruse, *Crisis of the Negro Intellectual* (New York: Quill, 1984), p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> The founding statement of the BYNC is quoted in Robert A. Slayton, *Back of the Yards: The Making of a Local Democracy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 203; Slayton describes the organizing work of BYNC in detail; see also Fisher, *People*, 54 - 56.

<sup>17</sup> Saul David Alinsky, *"Reveille for Radicals"* (New York: Random House, 1946), 76, 79.

<sup>18</sup> Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (University of California/Berkeley), p. 68

<sup>19</sup> Saul Alinsky, *Rules for Radicals* (New York: Vintage, 1971).

<sup>20</sup> Quote from "The Professional Radical: Conversations with Saul Alinsky," reprint of *Harper's* from June and July, 1965, 9; interview with Father John Egan, South Bend, Ind., August 2, 1980.

<sup>21</sup> Saul Alinsky, "Is There Life After Birth?" Speech to the Centennial Meeting of the Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Mass., June 7, 1967 (Chicago: I.A.F. reprint), 12-13.

<sup>22</sup> Peter Berger and John Neuhaus, *To Empower People: The Role of Mediating Structures in Public Policy* (The American Enterprise Institute, 1978).

<sup>23</sup> Frances Moore Lappé, "From a National Day of Service to the Promise of Citizen Power," *Huffington Post*, Jan 19, 2009.

<sup>24</sup> Nick Longo, *Why Community Matters: Connecting Education and Civic Life* (SUNY, 2008). For more on the CDC initiatives see [www.publicwork.org](http://www.publicwork.org) and also Boyte, *The Citizen Solution: How You Can Make a Difference* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 2008).

<sup>25</sup> David Mathews, "Public-Government/Public-Schools," *National Civic Review* 85, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 15; Peter Levine, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens* (Boston: Tufts University Press, 2007), 110.

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.communityschools.org/index.php?Itemid=49&id=44&option=content&task=view>

<sup>27</sup> Deborah Meier, "So What Does It Take to Build a School for Democracy?" *Phi Delta Kappan* 2003, p. 16 and personal interview, Boston, November 1, 2001.

<sup>28</sup> Paul Pribbenow, "Dual Citizenship: Reflections on Educating Citizens at Augsburg College," Address to the ELCA Vocation Conference, Luther College, July 31, 2008, pp. 4, 2.

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<sup>29</sup> Harry C. Boyte, "Against the Current: Building the Civic Agency of Students," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, May/June 2008 <http://www.changemag.org/Archives/author-lp/Harry-Boyte.html>

<sup>30</sup> The phrase "living democracy" comes from the work of Frances Moore Lappé. See especially *Democracy's Edge*.